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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2016

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SUBJECT: KURDS DISMISS LATEST SARG GESTURES ON STATELESS  
ISSUE

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: According to recent media reports, a delegation of 43 Kurdish tribal leaders recently met with high-ranking Syrian officials to discuss the restoration of citizenship for Syria's 300,000 stateless Kurds. While the SARG publicly touted the meeting as a further step towards resolving the issue, Kurdish political activists dismiss the claim, noting the absence of Kurdish political figures from the meeting and that this promise had already been made twice before in 2005 by President Bashar al-Asad.

¶2. (C) Media reports indicate that a delegation of 43 Kurdish tribal leaders met January 30 with Regional Command National Security Office head Hisham Ikhtiyar and Ba'th Party Regional Command Assistant Secretary General Mohammed Sa'id Bukhaytan. Press reports indicate that President Bashar al-Asad had intended to meet with the delegation but was unable to do so due to a scheduling conflict. Media reports quoted Shakib Hajoub, a representative of the Kurdish Haderkan tribe, citing a statement by Bukhaytan that "an order will be issued within the next month granting citizenship to about 300,000 Kurds" but that it was unclear whether the citizenship would be granted to all stateless Kurds immediately or if the process would be gradual.

¶3. (C) This announcement is another in a series of recent public statements by the SARG regarding the issue of stateless Kurds. The topic was mentioned as part of a package of reforms announced by President Bashar al-Asad during the Tenth Ba'th Party Congress held in June. During his November 10 address to the nation, Bashar also discussed "the census problem", noting that political developments had delayed any action on the issue but said that the issue would soon be solved as "an expression of the importance of national unity in Syria."

¶4. (C) Kurdish activists, however, reported later that the tribal leaders present were "angered" and unhappy with the meeting results. Yekiti Party activist Faisl Badr told Poloff that, based on conversations with Kurds who were present at the meeting, the Kurdish tribal leaders were angered that they had been lured to the Presidential Palace with promises of seeing Bashar, only to end up meeting with second-tier Ba'th officials. According to both Badr and Azadi Party activist Lugman Ois, the SARG officials insisted that the stateless issue is a social and not/not a political issue, a stance which is rejected by both parties. Ois added that Ikhtiyar and Bukhaytan described Hassekeh province in northeastern Syria (a Kurdish stronghold) as being historically Armenian, Arab, and Assyrian (thus implying no Kurdish history), and suggested that one condition of resolving the stateless issue would be to require Kurds to register in districts other than Hassekeh. (NOTE: As

registrations determine voting location, this step would, in effect, dilute the voting power of Kurds in any future elections.) Both Badr and Ois commented that the SARG's timing was in reaction to international and domestic pressure, with Ois adding that it was an attempt to divide the Kurds from the rest of the opposition.

15. (C) COMMENT: Skepticism towards this latest promise of resolving the Kurdish problem is certainly warranted, given Bashar's failure to act on earlier promises. SARG officials have quite a history of picking up one aspect or another of the Kurdish issue for short-term political gain for PR purposes, designed for the international community, and then dropping it after an initial splash of publicity.  
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